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# Poets on Craft: Bryan Thao Worra and Bao Phi

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, August 19th, 2020

*Poets on Craft* is a cyberspace for contemporary poets to share their thoughts and ideas on the process of poetry and for students to discover new ways of approaching the writing of poetry. In the face of a pandemic that is both viral and political, it is a resource for strength and creativity, friendship and beauty, love and rejuvenation. It is thus a celebration of the beautiful and eclectic minds of contemporary poets. This series is intended for educational purposes only.

The format is as follows. I emailed poets these questions: "Generally speaking, how do you build a poem? How do you start a poem? How do you move from one line to the next? How do you know when to end a poem?"

With the exception of length requirement, poets are free to respond in whatever manner they find appropriate to their styles and concerns.

Access to *Poets on Craft* is democratic. Generally speaking, anyone can have free access to these posts. With that said, please consider supporting our poets by clicking on the links in their bios and purchasing their work.

For this fourth post of the series, we have Bryan Thao Worra and Bao Phi.

*Bryan Thao Worra is the Lao Minnesotan Poet Laureate. You can find his latest collection of poetry BEFORE WE REMEMBER WE DREAM at Sahtu Press.*

When it comes to starting a poem, my method is a little complicated to describe, but almost all of my verse is founded on a premise of tension between the imagined and the fading memory I seek to preserve by creating an elaborate trigger. Just enough reference to bring back the rest into various levels of focus. I often cross-check my verse-in-progress against mythology, classical literature, or the science fictional, and expressions of faith and history. I tend to avoid overworking, overthinking a poem more than a day.

I usually start by thinking of the most clear, obvious way to express an idea. Then I'll say: That sucks. Because a poet's task is to push our languages to the limits. So, I start reconfiguring the line in terms of syntax, adjectives, adverbs, metaphors, similes, allusions, hidden acrostics, and a sense of the subversive, looking for the least expected direction we might approach a phrase until I'm no longer left with merely a standard sentence. A line is usually working for me when I can stop right

there, and not read another word of the poem and it's satisfying, but I'm still interested in what the poet may have to say on the next line. This is a difficult task to achieve. I particularly enjoy it when a poem is laced with a meaning that can evade censors in my various readers' homelands, but that's an issue for a different conversation.

Ending a poem is a complicated question that I usually have to consider on a case by case basis. In my process, one never really "knows" it is time to end a poem as much as we regularly intuit the moment has arrived to stop working on the poem for the moment and just get it out there into the world. You sense that it means largely what you intend for it to say while suspecting that at some point in the future you'll find a new layer or level of meaning, perhaps just a shift that will surprise you when you read it in the context of the history and imaginings that have unfolded since. I find two specific measures recur regularly for much of my work: I can glance at the title and the closing line is as dear to me as the starting line, and I can often stand 5 to 6 feet away and recognize my poem from afar among those by other poets, and when I'm lucky I can usually distinguish them from other poems of my own. It's not a criteria set in stone, but it works more often than not for my verse.

*Bao Phi is a Vietnamese American poet born in what was called Saigon and raised in South Minneapolis. He is a spoken word artist, poet, arts administrator, and children's book author. (Photo by Anna Min)*

Every poem is different, and the process to get to each one is different. The two common elements of any poem I write are: the work I put in editing and revising, and the voice of the poem.

Many of my poems begin as a collection of lines and ideas that are in conversation with each other. I sit with the mess, and see if I can sort it into something interesting. What is this poem's core? What is its soul? And then I ask myself what the poem's voice is. The poem can then turn out to be anything from a persona poem to a narrative prose poem, or it may need a preexisting form like a sestina or villanelle. More and more, I am experimenting with creating my own loose forms, and trying not to worry too much about categories and boxes. And then, it's edit, revise, workshop, revise, edit.

Each poem requires a different ending. Some of them circle back, some of them are abrupt. Again, it depends on what is at the poem's heart. Often, I feel if I've done all of the other work throughout the rest of the poem, the ending arrives pretty easily.

*(Featured photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher)*

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